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# Last Post: Alternatives to Postmodernism. *A Review Article*

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Try dropping the baited keyword “postmodernism” or any of its variants into the computer of a research library. This will bring to the screen’s surface hundreds of titles in a dozen fields, a shoal of terms and theories. Their conflicts and fates, as one argument has answered or ignored another and grander theories have swallowed lesser over the past twenty years, account for some of these proliferating “post-al” modes of thinking—poststructuralism and postcolonialism could net almost as many entries. What we need now is not yet another theory to add to the pool but some account of this way of thinking, some recognition of its distinctiveness, even of its strangeness. What is the perception or awareness that has made it so pervasive? What accounts for the terms of a debate in which culture and society are held to be afterthoughts, even aftershocks, produced by the completion or failure or suspension of the modern or modernist, of structuralism or colonialism? In what follows I want to consider what recent writing on postmodernism and related subjects may offer as answers to these questions. Not as one more rejoinder in a long debate, but rather as a step toward other ways of viewing our human world. Some of these other ways are beginning to emerge in recent work, chiefly in philosophy and critical theory, and I will turn to them in closing. Read together as it has been published over the past while, this work suggests alternatives to postmodernist theory’s view of causality as the source of lost causes.

We might begin by trying to discern the origin of postmodernism itself, not least because its relations to the historical are so unusual. In what remains one of the most panoptic accounts, Fredric Jameson suggests why his narrative may have to remain a story rather than a history when he characterizes the postmodern “as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.”<sup>1</sup> Like the amnesia of witnesses before Congressional committees, the memory of postmodernism has no clear recollection of the past but so total a recall of the present that everything can be made to fit. Or almost everything: Consistency of style and a sense of anachronism are alien to the postmodern, which is eclectic of

<sup>1</sup> *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

necessity, contemporary by compulsion. A promiscuous optimism has marked postmodernist theorizing from the beginning, though it has taken very different forms, ranging from Lyotard's facile subversions to Hutcheon's encyclopedic assurance.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the project of modernism, which is the attempt to salvage through style what has been lost through history and which as a result is haunted by longings after coherence and fears of oblivion, postmodernism's only nostalgia is for the present. That present is not present(ed) as a narrative but rather as a synthetic landscape and soundscape: a drive through Las Vegas with the windows up and the radio on. This is why repressed memory is the nemesis of the postmodern, just as amnesia is the nemesis of modernism. It also follows that any discourse such as Jameson's book, which appears in a series entitled, "Post-Contemporary Interventions," becomes a meta-discourse that provides a necessary (in this case Marxist) account of a culture that is incapable of accounting for itself. The vaporizing of historical memory in Jameson's vision of the postmodern is accompanied and intensified by a withering away of the natural in a world dominated by artifice and technology: "Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good" (p. ix). Jameson explains this process, as we shall see and as his alternate title suggests, in terms of Ernst Mandel's "late capitalism"; but it has also been laid at the more local door of American anomie and gadgetry in a provocative book by William Irwin Thompson.<sup>3</sup> What we can share for now is the truth of Jameson's double insight that this denatured world has a history without dates or even events and that his attempt to theorize about it is "the effort to take the temperature of the age without instruments and in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an 'age' or zeitgeist or 'system' or 'current situation' any longer" (p. xi).

Yet obliteration is as essential to postmodernism as oblivion. In F. R. Ankersmit's persuasive account of postmodernism's implications for historical writing and theory, we are reminded that the new order of the postmodern began in architecture, as a reaction against the Bauhaus and modernist buildings of Le Corbusier, and that this era opened with a (fairly big) bang—the blowing-up of the Pruitt-Igoes building in St. Louis in 1972.<sup>4</sup> A searching and contrary view of this history goes even further back to show that avant-garde architects of the 1920s and 1930s had already created a precursor in "post-

<sup>2</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodernist Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), and Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> *The American Replacement of Nature: Economic Investments and Cultural Escapes* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> *History and Tropology: The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994), p. 182 and note. Ankersmit refers in turn to the fundamental study by Christopher Jencks, *Postmodernism: The New Classicism in Art and Architecture* (London, 1987).

humanism” that did away with any concept of an autonomous subject.<sup>5</sup> The chief landmarks or bearings in this tundra of theory are significantly works of art and artifice: Frank Gehry’s Santa Monica house, Claude Simon’s novels, Robert Gober’s installations, the Utopian visions of science fiction. The world explored in Jameson’s analyses is the world of what Simone Weil termed “decreation,” the change from nature to artifice, the loss of self whose manifestation in secular culture is art or poetry. A decentering or dispersal of the self through decreation is the black hole at the center of postmodernist and poststructuralist theory. But decreation in postmodernist art is a source of light, of new rules for games that renew our sense of play and of reality.

Most postmodernist theorists, like most deconstructive critics, arrogate to themselves the knowledge that art involves artifice and that argument involves mental play—implying throughout their writing that mere thinkers and poets do not know what they are doing or how their art achieves its ends. An exemplary deconstructive reading, such as Derrida’s detection of metaphor in Descartes, shares with much postmodernist theory the belated and doubly romantic premise that Descartes (or Keats) wrote unawares, that even the most artful awareness could not save either of them from the madness of language. And yet the daily work of thought and art belies this premise, which devalues both the self and the imagination. “More than three-fourths of our life is imaginary and fictitious,” as Simone Weil went on to perceive, and yet (or precisely because of this), “Every time we become aware that imagination is imaginary, we are saved.”

Blurring this distinction, or denying our ability to make it, opposes art and theory. Hence, a growing and to my mind significant divergence between postmodernism’s theoretical mask, whose expression tends to be impassive or bleak, and its creative personae, which range from the comic to the tragic. Although the most acute approaches to the subject, such as Brian McHale’s *Constructing Postmodernism*,<sup>6</sup> clearly recognize that its foundations stand on aesthetic constructs—the postmodernist elephant stands on the simulacrum of a tortoise—few theorists seem to have noticed that their theory and the practice of artists are at odds. One exception is Nicholas Zurbrugg’s *The Parameters of Postmodernism*, which wittily opposes the crisis mentality of theorists from Benjamin to Bourdieu (which he tags the “B-effect”) to the creative practice (the “C-effect”) of a John Cage.<sup>7</sup> Zurbrugg perceives and regrets “the loss in Post-modernism of the sense of the future” (p. 7). His approach brings to the discussion of postmodernism a welcome awareness that there is something odd about the belatedness of its theory, which Jameson ties to “late capitalism” and Hutcheon shifts from poetics to “problematics”; something

<sup>5</sup> K. Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Postmodernist Subject* (Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994).

deadening about presenting the contingency of theory<sup>8</sup> as though it were the origin of art. Could there also be something wrong with “post-al” thinking itself?

Postmodernism, along with other post positions, breaks with the principle and practice that art should conceal its artifice (*ars celare artem*) as a way of smoothing over and leaving seamless a reality that is in great part made up and contingent. Splitting with this aesthetic convention, it not only shows the cracks in the foundation—thereby undermining foundationalism—but even offers these cracks as part of the design. In aesthetic and political terms, it descends from Burke’s sublime, which breaks the surface created and smoothed by the beautiful. It could even be argued that the postmodern plays out eighteenth-century strategies of disillusionment (or deconstructions of illusion) on the level of technique and tactics. Swift and Gibbon satirize and ironize the grand narratives of mankind by pointing to the discrepancies that call them into question, and no deconstructive reading of narrative has gone further than Sterne in the writing of *Tristram Shandy*, which splits open the illusory coherence of the spoken and written—only to show us how both are in turn at odds with the printed. By comparison, the scaffolding displayed around the echo chamber of a postmodern fiction such as Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot* or Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Amalgamemnon* are clever reminders that it takes books to make more books. Postmodern architecture seems more assured, and possibly more resigned, about showing us the design inside its display case, as in Gehry’s Santa Monica house, even or especially if that more closely resembles a packing case. What is postal or posterior about all of these postmodern creations, some would argue, is their reversal or deconstruction of causality. The traditional account of causality holds that because the cause is first in the order of events it should also be granted primacy in the order of perceptions. But as Nietzsche was the first to argue in his *Will to Power*, we seek after causes only after we have observed their effects; and effects should therefore be seen as prior to, or even as origins of, the cause we adduce from those effects.<sup>9</sup> In theoretical terms, this reversal accounts for much in poststructuralism, above all for its central idea and activity of deconstruction. If we turn to the aesthetic and practical creations of postmodernism, however, Nietzsche’s theoretical reversal looks less bold, less satisfactory, as an account of the evidence. In part because, as Jonathan Culler has pointed out, his deconstruction of causality relies upon the very concept he reverses and seeks to destroy.<sup>10</sup> Beyond that, this reversal continues to accept the principle, called into question by Wittgenstein, of a valid analogy between cause-effect and reality-appearance.

<sup>8</sup> The title and thesis of Richard C. Wihl’s *The Contingency of Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> See Ankersmit’s discussion in *History and Tropology*, especially 166–9.

<sup>10</sup> *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 86–88.

In a number of late notebooks, some of them still unpublished, Wittgenstein pressed beyond the position of his *Philosophische Untersuchungen* (Philosophical Investigations) which emphasized the gestural and ostensive powers of language, to develop a performative and dramatic approach that overrides both traditional and deconstructive notions of causality. In the *Bemerkungen über die Farben* (Remarks on Color), a book quarried out of these late manuscripts, he distinguishes between the causal accounts of psychology and his own dramatic approach: "When psychology speaks of appearance, it connects it with reality. But we can speak of appearance alone, or we connect appearance with appearance."<sup>11</sup> This valuing of appearance and performance is related to the decreative side of postmodernism, but it is even closer to recent work that offers a step past posterior approaches.

Wittgenstein's revaluation also implies the revaluing of terms and practices degraded in most cultural discourse: notions of surface, imitation, and mimicry. In a bill of indictment directed against Jameson, for example, Perez Zagorin offers as features of postmodernism, "a new depthlessness and superficiality . . . the waning of affect and disappearance of or liberation from emotion . . . the prevalence of pastiche and imitation and cannibalization of past styles."<sup>12</sup> Instead of seeing them as superficial or "insincere," we can now see them as creative and constructive—not as Platonic shadows or echoes, but rather as fictions that make truths, or at least make them possible. A brilliant book in the field of what might be called ethnographic performance studies, Michael Taussig's *Mimesis and Alterity*, raises the possibility that mimicry may be to the world of contingency the interpretive and subversive key that narrative is to the world of totality: "Might not the mimetic faculty and the sensuous knowledge it embodies be precisely this hard-to-image state wherein 'the senses therefore become directly in their practise theoreticians'?"<sup>13</sup> In this passage's internal quotation, Taussig is citing Marx to establish a link between the carnal, the carnivalesque, and the theoretical that is essential to his expansive approach to the mimetic. Its discourse springs from ethnography, which offers a way past the postmodern in part because the ethnographic subject has long been presented as radically different from the decentered or dying subject of postmodernism. Although they are often tossed into the same "post-al" bag, the postcolonial or ethnographic subject is very different from the postmodern. It is presented as a once and future unity, needing only liberation from its subaltern or sepoy status to distinguish it from the dispersed self of our posthumanist world. And the ethnographic self

<sup>11</sup> "Die Psychologie, wenn sie vom Schein spricht, verbindet Schein mit Sein. Wir aber können vom Schein allein sprechen, oder wir verbinden Schein und Schein," G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, n.d.), 232. For a fuller account of Wittgenstein's position, see my "Performing Theory: Wittgenstein and the Trouble with Shakespeare," *Comparative Criticism*, 14:71–86.

<sup>12</sup> "Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations," *History and Theory*, 29:3, 266.

<sup>13</sup> (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 98.

embodied in the native informant has long been held to be exempt from (and incapable of) all the complexities and aporias of the anthropologist. As Gayatri Spivak has observed, "During these same centuries, the Native Informant [was] treated as the objective evidence for the founding of the so-called sciences like ethnography, ethno linguistics, comparative religion, and so on. So that, once again, the theoretical problems only relate to the person who knows. The person who *knows* has all of the problems of selfhood. The person who is *known*, somehow seems not to have a problematic self."<sup>14</sup>

Taussig changes that condescending view, both by his recognition of the complex other and by his discovery that mimicry can outdo reality. Two of his revealing examples make this clear. In the first, he notices that the magical turtle-figures of the Cuna Indians look much more like turtles than the decoy turtles do:

It strikes me as a "modernist" and unreal turtle with neither head nor neck nor flippers yet, to my way of seeing, which should never be confused with the turtle's, this is nevertheless quintessentially turtlish and irresistible. After all, it's a decoy. But then that's my point of view. My eye flicks back to the magically efficacious turtle, then back again to the decoy. In my mind's eye somewhere off screen, I see a "real" turtle happily splashing in the green-blue waters of the Caribbean. Is the decoy closer to the real turtle than the magically effective imitation? Or is the decoy closer to what the Indians think a real turtle thinks a real turtle looks like?—in which case why make the magical turtle-figures look so "real"? (pp. 11–12)

This is a revelation not only of the turtle's-eye view but also of the pragmatic reality of imitation and performance. The question is no longer, "how accurate?" but rather "how effective?"—and to whom? If postmodernist reality is, in Jameson's phrase, "really made up," this performative reality is "really acted out." In this cosmology, the world is an elephant standing not on a tortoise but on a decoy, and it is mock-turtles all the way down.

A second example is that of the elaborate parody of cricket played by Trobriand Islanders, first introduced by missionaries as a mimetic equivalent of war, but after the Second World War transformed by a film: "filmic magic mimicking mimicking."

What the film seizes upon is that in performing metaphor, many of these dances incur the return of the colonially repressed. Ironically, they mime war—World War II, to be precise—war being what Trobriand cricket was designed by missionaries to displace. Hence the subtitle to the film, *Trobriand Cricket: An Ingenious Response to Colonialism*. We see the dancers moving smartly along. Then the film switches abruptly to black and white, the absence of color that signifies the entry of black-and-white Pacific history. Against a tropical background and thatched roofs, we see rows of Australian soldiers in World War II marching at a good clip, three abreast, wheeling, rifles on their shoulder. The film cuts again, back to the color of the glistening dancers. There is a slight but audible gasp from the film's audience wherever I have seen this film. . . .

<sup>14</sup> "Questions of Multiculturalism," in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, Sara Harasym, ed. (New York, 1990), 66.



And the gasp is followed by a rippling chuckle, an outward opening of the soul, a satisfying enclosing of possession. We “got it.” We got the idea. (p. 244)

This “excessive mimesis” establishes the selfhood of the dancers through the dance—which Plato’s *Laws* present as the strongest kind of mimesis—which in turn through the film’s montage satirizes the juxtaposed drill of the soldiers. Mimickry, seen in most postcolonial theory as a badge of servility, can here be seen as a liberating force for the audience as well as for the ethnographic subject.

The expressive and aesthetic alternative to postmodernism that Taussig develops from ethnography has an analogy in Charles Taylor’s innovative work in philosophy. In his great book, *The Sources of the Self* (1989), and the more personal essays—originally radio talks—published as *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1992),<sup>15</sup> Taylor develops two powerful renewals of identity. The first centers the individual identity on the social; the second argues that we become fully human through the “dialogical selves” we acquire through languages of expression, of which the richest is the language of poetry. Some of the pragmatic and performative implications of Taylor’s work emerge in Mette Hjort’s *The Strategy of Letters*, which shows that the literary work shapes reality through a mode of strategic action.<sup>16</sup> That is, while the poet in Taylor’s approach creates an awareness for which we previously had no vocabulary, Hjort’s writer is a strategist who creates consequences by defining situations. Taken together as alternatives to postmodernism, these differing approaches are tokens that performative mimesis makes a reality, an ostensive art of gesture that can both rehearse history and repeat the truth with which Augustine’s *Confessions* open—that the first language of mankind is not made of words but of gestures. And a rehearsal involves not only the repetition of what has already been written but also the performance to come. The past starts now, but so too does the future.

<sup>15</sup> Both published by the Harvard University Press.

<sup>16</sup> (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).